



Report to Cabinet

Date:	15th February 2022
Title:	Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy
Cabinet Member(s):	Councillor Nick Naylor Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services
Contact officer:	Nigel Dicker (Service Director – Housing and Regulatory Services) / Michael Veryard (Head of Housing)
Ward(s) affected:	None specific
Recommendations:	<ol style="list-style-type: none">1. That Members consider the draft Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy and comment as appropriate2. That the Leader of the Council be given delegated authority to make any final amendments to the draft Homelessness Strategy (following feedback from Members and the completion of the public consultation exercise) and to agree the final version of the Homelessness Strategy in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services.3. That the final version of the Homelessness Strategy as agreed by the Leader of the Council is then reported to full Council for consideration and adoption.
Reason for decision:	The recommended option will ensure that the Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy is in place in accordance with the statutory requirements of the Homelessness Act 2002 and the Transitional Arrangements No.2 Regulations 2008.

1. Executive summary

- 1.1 The Transitional Arrangements No.2 Regulations 2008 require a new Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy in place by 1/4/2022. Following delays arising from the pandemic and service restructure, work has now been undertaken to develop a new draft strategy for consideration and adoption. In order to ensure that the Council can adopt its new Homelessness Strategy within a reasonable timeframe, Cabinet is being asked to consider and comment on the draft strategy ahead of a public consultation process and to give delegated authority to the Leader of the Council to agree the final version of the Strategy document for presentation to full Council for consideration and adoption on 27/4/2022. The Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities has been updated and notified of the timetable for adopting the Strategy by the end of April 2022.

2. Content of report

- 2.1 The Homelessness Act 2002 requires the Council to publish a Homelessness Strategy document every five years. The overarching purpose of this document is to set down the Council's strategy for preventing homelessness wherever possible and for securing that sufficient accommodation and support is available for people who are (or may become) homeless.

- 2.2 On vesting day (1/4/2020), the three existing Homelessness Strategies in Buckinghamshire were carried forward from the former District Councils to the new authority:

- Aylesbury Vale Housing and Homelessness Strategy 2019-2022
- Chiltern and South Bucks Joint Housing Strategy 2018-2021 (Affordable Housing and Homelessness)
- Wycombe Area Homelessness Strategy and Action Plan 2014-19

These three strategies have remained in place to date underpinned by Action Plans and quarterly Homelessness forum meetings involving key internal and external stakeholders.

- 2.3 The Transitional Arrangements No.2 Regulations 2008 required that Buckinghamshire Council had a new single Homelessness Strategy in place by 1/4/2022 (two years after vesting day).

- 2.4 The impacts of both the Covid pandemic and the subsequent restructuring of the Housing Service during 2021 resulted in a delay in undertaking the review and development of the Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy. In October 2021, the Council appointed an external specialist housing consultant, Housing Quality Network, to support the development of the new strategy including:
- Reviewing the existing Homelessness Strategies carried forward from the District Councils
 - Reviewing levels of homelessness in Buckinghamshire and current and future trends
 - Undertaking consultation workshops with Members and key internal and external stakeholders (including Council Homelessness Officer)
 - Drafting a Strategy document for consideration
- 2.5 As part of the above a series of stakeholder events were held during November and December 2021 comprising:
- Two sessions with external stakeholders, agencies and partners in the north and south of Buckinghamshire
 - One session with internal Council stakeholders and services outside of the housing service (e.g. social care)
 - One session with Council Homelessness Officers
 - One session with Members
- 2.6 Following the above, a draft Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy document has been drafted for consideration. In view of the limited time that is available to get the Strategy drafted and agreed in line with the Transitional Regulations, the draft has been assembled to provide an overview of the current and future homelessness situation in Buckinghamshire and high level priorities for the next three years 2022 – 2025. It is intended that when the strategy is adopted, the Council will move forward in updating and revising its existing Homelessness Service Operational Action Plans which will sit beneath the Strategy and set down the detail of how the Council and its partners will operationally deliver the priorities in the strategy. The existing Action Plans are already used by the Council and its partner agencies (via the quarterly Homelessness Forum meetings) to monitor how the Council is meeting its strategic homelessness commitments and this will continue going forward under the new strategy. We will also review the overall Homelessness Strategy document annually to ensure that it continues to remain fit for purpose and identify any amendments to priorities that may be needed to reflect changes in local and national circumstances over the next few years.

2.7 As stated above, the Council has consulted key stakeholders and partners on the development of the new Buckinghamshire Homelessness Strategy via a series of workshops. However, the limited time available has also meant that it has not been possible to undertake a formal public consultation on the new draft strategy ahead of bringing it to Cabinet for consideration. In view of this, a public consultation exercise on the draft document is being carried out alongside reporting it to Cabinet. It is proposed that the Leader of the Council be given delegated authority to make any final amendments to the draft documents (in light of the feedback from Members and the public consultation exercise) and to agree the final version of the Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy (in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services) to then take forward to full Council on 27th April 2022 for consideration and adoption. Although this means that adoption will be after 1st April 2022, the Council is updating the Department of Levelling Up, Housing and Communities on the progress of the new Homelessness Strategy and the timetable for adoption by the end of April 2022.

2.8 A copy of the draft Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy 2022-2025 is in the appendices. The document comprises the following sections:

- A strategy document setting out key findings and the high level priorities and action plan going forward (**Appendix 1**)
- An evidence base showing the current position including key information on housing and homelessness in Buckinghamshire and emerging themes and challenges. This document also includes a summary of the stakeholder consultation exercise that took place to support preparation of the strategy (**Appendix 2**)

Overall, the content and priorities set down in the draft do not represent any significant changes to those set down in the three existing Homelessness Strategies that are in place (see Paragraph 2.2).

2.9 Although the approach above is intended to get an adopted Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy in place as soon as possible after 1/4/22, the Council and its partners will still have scope to continue to influence and adapt the Strategy going forward. It is intended going forward that the Council will review the high level priorities and action plan in the Homelessness Strategy on an annual basis in regular consultation with key stakeholders and partner agencies. This will be done via the Council's regular Homelessness Forum meetings and other engagement. This will allow us to regularly re-visit the Strategy document and, where necessary, bring forward any amendments or changes to the document for consideration in response to the wider homelessness situation.

3. Other options considered

- 3.1 The Council could continue with the existing Homelessness Strategies which were carried forward from the former District Councils and then look to adopt a new Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy at a later date. However, as stated in Paragraph 2.3, this would not meet the requirement of the Transitional Arrangements No.2 Regulations 2008 which require that Buckinghamshire Council has a new single Homelessness Strategy in place by 1/4/2022. Therefore, delaying the adoption of a new Homelessness Strategy to a later date could leave the Council open to challenge going forward because it may be deemed not to have a current Homelessness Strategy in place. As well as the potential reputational damage arising from this, there is also the risk of legal challenge as the Council is required (under s1(5) on the Homelessness Act 2002) to have regard to its Homelessness Strategy when exercising its functions.
- 3.2 The Council could move forward with adopting a new Homelessness Strategy without undertaking a formal public consultation exercise. The Homelessness Act 2002 does not require the Council to undertake a formal public consultation exercise before adopting or modifying a homelessness strategy and states instead that the authority “shall consult such public or local authorities, voluntary organisations or other persons as they consider appropriate” (S. 1(8) of the Homelessness Act 2002). However, although the Council has undertaken stakeholder events and consultation as part of the preparation of the draft, it is likely to face challenge and reputational damage if the Council were to seek to adopt the Strategy without undertaking any public consultation on the draft.

4. Legal and financial implications

- 4.1 The Legal context implications of the options under consideration are set down within the report (including Paragraphs 3.1 and 3.2 above)
- 4.2 There are no specific financial implications linked to this report. The report deals with the adoption of the new Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy and setting high level priorities and actions going forward. The report is not seeking any financial commitments at this stage.
- 4.3 The Financial implications of the Strategy are not yet quantified; the Strategy will set out direction of travel and high level priorities, which will then be later formalised into a more detailed, costed action plans. There are existing, uncommitted Capital budgets in the MTFP, totalling £4.8m, which are earmarked for the delivery of the affordable housing and homelessness strategies. There is no growth (additional funding) set aside in the MTFP for additional activity on homelessness. However, there is flexibility in the use of the annual Homelessness Prevention Grant (currently

£1.6m), and opportunity to bid to the Rough Sleepers Grant and other grant opportunities which arise ad hoc, to fund activity which delivers the strategy.

5. Corporate implications

- 5.1 The Buckinghamshire Homelessness Strategy will directly contribute to the delivery of the Corporate Plan priority for “Protecting the Vulnerable”.
- 5.2 The Strategy will be subject to an Equality Impact Assessment.

6. Local councillors & community boards consultation & views

- 6.1 A virtual Member Workshop event on the development of the Homelessness Strategy was held on 16th December 2021 and the contributions to this workshop and been fed into the drafting of the draft Strategy document.
- 6.2 The Community Boards will be advised of the consultation on the draft Homelessness Strategy document.

7. Communication, engagement & further consultation

- 7.1 As stated in the report, the draft Strategy document will be subject to a public consultation exercise.

8. Next steps and review

- 8.1 The draft strategy will be subject to a public consultation exercise. Following the input from Cabinet and the review of the responses to the public consultation, the Leader of the Council will make any final amendments to the draft strategy and agree the final version of the Buckinghamshire Council Homelessness Strategy (in consultation with the Cabinet Member for Housing, Homelessness and Regulatory Services) which will be presented to full Council for consideration and adoption.

9. Background papers

- 9.1 It is a legal requirement to make available background papers relied on to prepare a report and these should be listed at the end of the report (copies of background papers for executive decisions must be provided to democratic services). **Hyperlinks to papers published online should be used where possible. Where there are no background papers, insert none.**



10. Your questions and views (for key decisions)

- 10.1 If you have any questions about the matters contained in this report please get in touch with the author of this report. If you have any views that you would like the cabinet member to consider please inform the democratic services team. This can be done by telephone [01296 382343] or email [democracy@buckinghamshire.gov.uk]

